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Intermittency: the differential of time and the integral of space

The intensive spatiality of the Monad, the *Apokatastasis* and the Messianic World in Benjamin's latest thinking

Fabrizio Desideri

The main topic of my paper concerns the theological-philosophical nexus between the intensive and qualitative spatiality of the Monad and the Origenian idea of *Apokatastasis* as a nexus that can clarify Benjamin's latest idea of the Messianic World. To investigate this relationship will help us understand what Benjamin means when he writes:

It is a world of strict discontinuity; what is always again new is not something old that remains, or something past that recurs, but one and the same crossed by countless intermit-
tences. (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 843; Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, 1011)

The first step will be, therefore, to explain (1) Benjamin's use of the Origenian notion of *Apokatastasis* in his essay on Leskov and in the *Passagenwerk*. Secondly, I will discuss (2) how and to what extent such use is relevant for Benjamin's idea of Messianism. Thirdly, I will propose (3) the thesis that, according to Benjamin, a messianic idea of time implies a monadological idea of space. In this regard, the relationship between continuity and discontinuity, which is crucial to understand the late Benjamin's idea of history, must be understood precisely as a dialectical relationship that involves not only time but also space (4). The figure of intermittence – as we shall see – expresses in the most suitable way the intertwining of space and time as dialectically and messianically oriented. This sequence of logical steps and critical considerations will shed light on the true nature of Benjamin's idea of dialectics and on its relationship to the idea of the totality. The real term of confrontation of Benjamin's late philosophy (from the *Passagenwerk* to the *Theses on the concept of history*) does not concern, therefore, Heidegger, but Hegel. In the

light of this confrontation, Heidegger's *Being and Time* is already in pieces, as if it were – we might say – behind Benjamin's movement of thought.

However, we must proceed in order.

(1) In Benjamin's work, the Origenian idea of *Apokatastasis* or reintegration of all things appears for the first time in the context of the essay on *The storyteller*. The year in which Benjamin publishes the essay on Leskov, we must not forget, is the same in which he publishes the French version of the essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*. Both essays assume and in some ways continue, albeit on the different problematic ground of the relationship between experience and present, the philosophical work on the Paris arcades. On the one hand, Benjamin faces the disenchantment of the artwork with the decay of its aura; on the other hand, he analyzes the lost charm of the storytelling, in its tension with the novel form and with the loneliness of the modern reader. As the decline of the «artwork's auratic mode of existence» does not coincide with its end, but with the need to understand its transformations and its possible resurrection, in the same way, the magic atmosphere that binds the listener to the storyteller is not lost at all, but it continues to survive in the world of childhood. In both cases, to be attested is the constellation between experience and poverty, which is grasped by Benjamin as a time signature in the famous essay of 1933.

This constellation does not imply an absolute and non-dialectical end, but a space of variations. A space that is fed by the «residue» that remains, according to the essay on Surrealism («*Es bleibt ein Rest*»), with the interpenetration, inside technology, of body- and image-space (Benjamin [1927-1930]: 217).

The context of the reference to Origen is the fairy tale character of Leskov's narrative: «few storytellers have displayed so profound a kinship with the spirit of the fairy tale as did Leskov» (Benjamin [1935-1938]: 158).

To confirm this claim, Benjamin cites precisely the *Apokatastasis*' doctrine (explained here as «the entry of all souls into Paradise») which is contained in Origen's *De principiis*, a work that – as Benjamin notes – plays a decisive role in the Greek Orthodox Church, while it was rejected by the Roman Catholic Church. According to this doctrine, the resurrection could be interpreted, and this would be the case in Leskov's keeping «with Russian folk belief», «less as a transfiguration than a disenchantment in a sense akin to that found in fairy tales» (ibid.).

This interpretation permeates Leskov's tales and particularly *The Enchanted Pilgrim*. The reason that feeds them, as their narrative principle, is offered by a dialectics be-

tween the rescue from enchantment and that «liberating magic» that is peculiar to the fairy tale. On the one hand, the fairy tale «tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had Placed upon its chest» (Benjamin [1935-1938]: 157), on the other hand, it has, with its magical plot and its figures, a liberating effect.

From this dialectics depends the comparison between the fairy tale and the myth, with the principle of repetition that dominates it. The fairy tale and with it, at least as a possibility, the work of art, anticipates the end of the mythical necessity that condemns the human happening to the eternal repetition of the identical. According to Novalis' romantic philosophy the fairy tale, and every artistic expression that preserves the memory of it, is prophetic. According to its prophetic character, a number of Leskov's tales focus on the figure of the righteous man. The righteous men, «the beings that lead the procession of Leskov's creations», are «magically escaped» (Benjamin [1935-1938]: 158).

How are they «escaped»? What do they have to do with Origen's doctrine?

In this regard, Benjamin shows that the reference to the *Apokatastasis* is not occasional at all. Indeed, the righteous man appears as «the advocate for all creatures, and at the same time he is their highest embodiment». In the righteous man the continuum «of the creaturely world» (ibid., 159), as «a bridge established between this world and the other», recapitulates itself and unfolds at the same time. Apex of the hierarchical structure of this continuum, the righteous ones are – Benjamin observes – «imago» of Leskov's Mother (ivi, 157).

Too eloquent and full of resonance is, however, the term “imago” to be limited to a reference to Leskov's biography. In this word resonates, I think, something of the relevance, for Benjamin, of the Origenian doctrine of *Apokatastasis* and of its influence on Benjamin's meditation on the relationship between history and Messianism. In particular, it is of absolute importance that, for Origen, the eschatological doctrine of the restoration of all things, and in particular, of the rational creatures, created at the beginning, implies that «the beginning arises in turn from the end» (Origen [219-230]: III, 6, 1). This, however, does not mean that we can speak of an absolute identity between the beginning and the end. The relationship between the end of all things and their beginning is rather that of likeness. «In fact – Origen writes – the end is always like the beginning: and as there is one end to all things, so ought we to understand that there was one beginning» (ibid., I, 6, 2). In the *parousia*, where all the material substances undergo also «a change of quality and a transformation of figure», the «dispersion and division of the one principle will be reintegrated into one and the same end and likeness» (ibid., I, 6, 4).

«End and likeness»: the relationship refers to the way Origen interprets Genesis I, 26, where it is spoken of the creation of man in «image and likeness» of God. The space between image and likeness is the space of the infinite perfection; it is the space of a continuing tension that implies the Origenian synergism or the relationship between God's grace and human operari.

Leskov's righteous man expresses this tension. As Benjamin does not fail to observe, this tension has its reversal in the pure materiality of the stone, «the lowest stratum of created things» (Benjamin [1935-1938]: 161), as «the abyss of the inanimate» (ibid., 159). However, as for Origen the material substance is redeemed and the demonic does not rise to another ontological principle, in the same way for Leskov, according to Benjamin's interpretation, the pole of the pure materiality (the figure of the stone as opposite to that one of the righteous man) does not mean the gnostic antithesis between creation and redemption.

If an antinomian ethics is touched here, it has however a dialectical reversal, which recalls that of the baroque allegory in the conclusion of the book on the *Trauerspiel*. This reversal is not due to the storyteller: to the fairy tale and to the artistic fiction in general. This would mean to transform its prophetic value in an illusory utopia. Yet, fully consistent with the quote from Valéry with which Benjamin approaches the conclusion of his essay, the «artistic observation» – in the synergy between soul, eye and hand that informs it – can take on the characteristics of the mystical depth. In this way, the narrative performance can anticipate the direction of the dialectical reversal between the end and the beginning, which feeds on the difference between image and likeness.

(2) The other significant recurrence of the *Apokatastasis* theme in Benjamin's late period is contained – as already noted – in the group of texts belonging to the so-called *Pas-sagenwerk*. The most important mention is undoubtedly the one offered by the fragment N 1 a, 3. Here the context is no longer the theological-creatural relationship between narrative and redemption (the fairy tale as an anticipation of the liberation from myth), but it is the critical-methodological context of the «cultural-historical dialectic» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 459).

Benjamin introduces his observation as a «modest methodological proposal». However, as we shall see, it would be a mistake not to recognize the slightly ironic sense of «modest». The problem is that of a historical knowledge, which is not limited to the historicist acceptance of the facts, but feeds on a constructive tension with its epistemic object. In short, the problem is to define the relationship between criticism and history, especially

on the issue of representing the meaning and form of an epoch by analyzing its phenomena with a micrological method. The process will be, therefore, that of establishing oppositions, screening and re-configuring data and elements by operating selections «according to certain points of view, within the various “fields” of any epoch» (ibid.).

What appears «forward-looking», «lively» and «positive» will be divided, therefore, from what is shown as «abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent». If we would stop here, anyway, Benjamin's proposal could effectively sound «modest». This, we might observe, is nothing more than the standard view of a critical procedure. Benjamin's passage consists, however, in making the boundary between positive and negative – in whose light only the opposition between the *vivum*, the memorable of historical phenomenon, and the *mortuum*, what may be consigned to oblivion, makes sense – intimately mobile. The mobility of the boundary between the positive and the negative of historical knowledge, with its epistemically constructive dimension, implies the assumption of the negation principle as engine of a dialectical movement. By the power of negation, through its original inquietude Benjamin conceives the form of historical time to the second power: as the time of a construction, which finds in the destruction of the continuity appearance its generative moment (the other facies of its critical constructiveness).

In this regard, Benjamin's move is certainly mindful of Hegel's dialectic, which is the subject of a significant interest during his drafting of the Arcades's Project (surely via Marx, but also, perhaps, following the meeting with Kojève in Paris during the seminars of the Collège de Sociologie). At the same time, however, Benjamin sets the basis for a decisive confrontation with Hegel (as some brief, but eloquent statements in the whole *Passagenwerk* attest). Every negation thus acquires value in relation to the profile of the positive that it points out and leads to manifestation. Consequently, the contours of the living and the positive appear from the bottom of the negative. However, in this appearing of historical truth as an epistemic objects, there is nothing fixed forever. The separating and discerning power of negation is applied every time again to what had been previously excluded. The point of view changes, but the criteria that inspire the critical-negative movement have not been abandoned. In the gap, a new positive element emerges: «something different from previously signified» (ibid.). Without that a last line in time and in historical object can be predicted, a last line that makes the division between the positive and the negative something permanent. «And so on, ad infinitum – Benjamin concludes – until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical *Apokatastasis*» (ibid.).

With the latter observation, the purely methodological tonality of Benjamin's considerations is abandoned. The discourse on method here alludes directly to the question of the criterion, from which it moves and to which it applies, letting us see its theological and metaphysical assumption. The past that as a whole is brought into the present coincides logically with the figure of the Parousia, where the end generates the beginning. The premise of the entire work on the Parisian passages, in fact, consists in the reprise of Plato's program to save phenomena. A program, to which Benjamin shows himself faithful already in the book on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. To the Jewish Platonism of names outlined in the *Foreword* to the book on the *Trauerspiel*, in which philosophy has the task of restoring the original symbolic power, corresponds, in the Arcades Project, a Platonism from below – from the dark background of the historical material – with the task of making justice to every phenomenon, even to the most disjointed and marginal. The following fragment is sufficiently clear to dispel any doubt that the “ad infinitum” of the task, namely of the critical-dialectical movement of thought in relation to the historical object, could be interpreted in a historicist sense (against Benjamin's intentions). As the latter does not fail to note.

This can also be expressed – as argued in the fragment that ends with the reference to the method of *Apokatastasis* – in the following terms: «the indestructibility of the highest life in all things» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 459; N1 a, 4). Put differently: this is no more only methodology, but theology. Moreover, Origen's doctrine implied already that between the beginning of creation and its end, which resembles to it as its reintegration, there was a slow and gradual process of changes «through endless ages» (Origen [219-230]: III, 6, 6). In a continuum of infinite variations and re-configurations of the constituted orders, where the rejoin of the end with the beginning (the moment in which the end generates the beginning) remains problematically open to the conversion of the likeness in the perfection of unity (*ibid.*, III, 6, 1).

Indubitable is, however, the opening to variations and changes in the Origenian model and, with it, an idea of dialectics that consists and lives exclusively of almost imperceptible differences, nuances from which originates the strength of a critical discernment that gives expression, in all things, to the indestructible side of their life, where the end and the beginning coincide. Just in this direction, Benjamin concludes the second fragment: in a Warburgian praise of detail and nuance as the place of dialectical contrast. Benjamin's micrology reveals itself, then, as a method of thinking that exercises in then dialectical micro-contrast.

Here and even more decisively in the drafting of the *Theses on History* and in their preparatory fragments, Benjamin resumes the theory of the micrological apperception of the idea as monad that he outlined in the *Foreword* to the book on the *Trauerspiel*. Without abandoning its subtle ontological implications, the theory of the monad develops now in close connection with the theory of the dialectical image. From the perspective of this connection, we can consider Benjamin's criticism of the Hegelian idea of the relationship between time and dialectic. According to Benjamin, with Hegel «time enters into dialectic», but essentially as a «time of thinking», oscillating between its historical character and its psychological character. Although Benjamin's criticism does not do justice to the complexity of Hegel's dialectics, the perspective that he opposes to it here is clear. The truth and the power of dialectics consists in the «time differential [*Zeitdifferential*]» in the form of images. On the image's «temporal momentum [*Zeitmoment*]» relies the principle of variation and the critical leverage of negation. As interwoven with time, the image is in its own right a «dialectical image». The image's present culminates in the «*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*» that for Benjamin represents the canon of the messianic truth: a truth that can irremediably escape and fall into oblivion, if not caught in the light of the idea of Justice. «Salvation of the past means to hold the *Zeit* in *Jetzt*, causing the *Jetzt-Zeit*». To stop time, the messianic gesture of grasping its inner discontinuity, derives for Benjamin from the attempt of catching its differential origin (its consisting of the quasi-nothing of the image). However, it is not possible to aim at restoring the figures (the integral) of its fulfillment, if not converting time, caught in the differential character of the images, in the integral of space.

(3) «It is a world of strict discontinuity [...] always again new [...] not something old that remains, or something past that recurs, but one and the same crossed by countless intermittences [*das von zahllosen Intermittenzen gekreuzte Eine und Selbe*]» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 843; Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, 1011). Although the context of this observation is that of the relationship between «the optics of the myriorama and the time of the Modern», its meaning has undoubtedly a more general value. While it regards hell, the time of the condemnation to endless repetition, it involves the Messianic world too. The first is only the sinister parody of the second: its inverted image. For this reason, the fragment ends with the reference to «the chapter on origin in the book on Baroque». According to the intermittence's principle, which constitutes the critical heart of the passage, «every look in space meets with a new constellation» (ibid.). To grasp the modern, the time that distinguishes itself by the complementarity between infinite pro-

gress and eternal return, means, thus, to understand it «as the new in the context of what has always already been there» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 544; S 1.4).

The gesture of recognizing the uniqueness of a constellation in the space of the identical is as much «theological» as «political» (ibid., 543; S 1, 3). In this gesture, time and space lose their abstract separateness. Internal and external inter-permeate in the space-time of a monadic configuration that, with the words of the *Preface* to the book on the *Trauerspiel*, constitutes an «objective interpretation of the phenomena» that includes the viewer's gaze. This configuration, where the time continuum as «eternal passage» is converted in the space of a monadic totality, however, is conceivable only in the dialectic that extinguishes the absolute appearance of the image in the truth of the name.

In this dialectic, the image of Modern, of actual times, as hell is led back to recognize its origin, and therefore its truth, in the space-time of passage. To identify the *Ursprung*, the origin, as passage means to conceive as a single act the Messianic stop of time in the political actuality of redemption and the task of the *restitutio in integrum* as a restoration of the principle. The possibility to think the unity between these two moments transforms into a deep theological insight what may look like «a tired and withered truth» namely, «that the world is always the same (that all events could have taken place in the same space)» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 546; S 1, 5). The intuition concerns the fact that the arrest of the Messianic time, the crisis of its continuum coincides with the generation of its principle, to which the image of the end resembles.

At the heart of this insight there is, therefore, the truth that «*Ursprung ist das Ziel*» (origin is the goal), but specifying that this applies to every moment because the truth depends on it. Indeed, it is the «*Jetzt der Erkenntbarkeit*» that articulates the dialectical method as a concrete and precise intersection between the differential time of image and the space in which the image takes place and comes into existence. As Benjamin states in a methodological fragment of the *Passagenwerk*, the «higher concretion» of the *Jetztsein* (of the now-being), in which the dialectical method does justice to a historical situation, is exactly that of a waking consciousness: «*Wachseins!* (Waking being!)» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 391; K2, 3). On the other hand, this now-being is nothing less than the «*Jetztzeit*», the actuality of the world that is understood in the tension or in the endless task of unifying revelation and redemption, origin and goal. This task can also result in an endless process of integration, where «everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 392; K2, 3).

The highest concretion is thus conceived in the perspective of a monadic integration that culminates in the figure of the ontological and epistemic *Jetztzeit* joining the curve

of the infinite time approximation (the principle of infinitesimal variation) and the permanence of identity: the being one and the same space as *integrum*: the integral of the whole. This figure of the *integrum*, the integral of the space, is conceivable, however, only at the apex of the *Jetztsein* of the *Jetztzeit*. This confers to the whole the vital dimension of an intensive existence. The now-being of the *Jetztzeit* – as Benjamin says – counts as something «*stoßweises und intermittierendes*»: of «pulsing and intermittent». The *Jetztzeit* as intermittence in being one and the same space in which all events happen and take place: all this says something significant about the dialectic between incompleteness and revelation which is inherent to the origin. This dialectic might be understood, however, also as reference to the idea of a contraction in the One, which the Lurianic Kabbalah speaks of. Precisely, as a reference on the level of likeness, rather than on that of mere image. The *Ursprung* as intermittence and, thus, memory of *tzimtzum*: self-contraction that upsets at the beginning «the inner equilibrium of the *Ein Sof*» (See Scholem [1991]: 83).

(4) The fact that the One and the Same is crossed by intermittences implies that the restoration of the initial equilibrium can be thought and realized only in the infinitesimal gap of a variation. This purely differential gap has the value of a catastrophe. As Benjamin had already noted in a fragment dated 1920/21 on the theory of knowledge and truth. «The sentence: truth belongs in one sense or another to the perfect state of the world (*zum vollendeten Weltzustand*) – Benjamin writes – grows catastrophically, grows by the dimension of the “now”» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: VI, 47). The «now of knowability (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*)» is the «logical time (*die logische Zeit*)», which has to replace that of «timeless validity» (Benjamin [1913-1926]: 276). With this step Benjamin anticipates the major theological issue involved in his last meditations on the concept of history: to think with the catastrophe that interrupts the continuum of time (the unit of time as *katastrophikòn*) and the task of making «whole what has been smashed» (Benjamin [1938-1940]: 392), reconstituting the integrity of beginning.

The «perfect state of the world», the redeemed world, the word of an integral actuality where the past had become «citable in all its moments», involves the idea of *Apokatastasis*. From the point of view of the task, where ethics and knowledge come together, it demands this idea in the form of an «infinitely intensive process». It requires it both logically and theologically. Therefore, Benjamin, perhaps without knowing it, is to rethink the same problem thought by Leibnitz in the fragment titled *Apokatástasis pantōn* (written in 1715, but published only in 1921 by M. Etlinger in *Leibniz als Geschichtsphilosoph*). While, how-

ever, Leibniz thinks the *apocatastasis* of all things in the light of the *lex continui* and, thus, of the infinite variation in the sense of a continuous progression, Benjamin conceives the same idea in the light of a radical discontinuity. To Leibniz's evolutionary apocalypse, where the link between Continuum and continuation excludes the interruption of an eschatological end of all things, Benjamin seems to oppose the ratio of the interval between catastrophe and messianic redemption. Even in Benjamin's thought is absent an eschatological solution, which divides time from eternity, but for an opposite reason than in Leibniz. Indeed, Benjamin shifts the catastrophe of time in every «now». To Leibniz's *lex continui* Benjamin opposes thus the rule of a radical discontinuity. The opposition, however, is less radical than it may appear at first glance. The sense of *discontinuum*, if caught in the dialectics that brings the pure differences of time to the space of their total figure (the realm of truth), is that of intermittence: the origin as intermittence, as Monad-fragment in which the truth is exploded and to which it always reassembles. Even the worst of all possible worlds can tip over into the space of an infinite approximation, in the shape of a redeemed world. Neither for Leibniz nor for Benjamin evil can, therefore, be thought of as another principle. This would be the case, if space could be dissolved in the time of consciousness, of an «absolute spirituality», separated from the world and from others. At least for Benjamin, all this depends on the fact that he does not allow this image to persist in itself. The «radical destruction of the world of images» consists in their dialectical reversal. In this reversal, absolute evil dissolves like appearance: it reveals what it is, «just and only allegory» (Benjamin [1928]: 208) and so is abandoned «the supposed infinity of despair» (ibid., 207).

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